

Salt and Light (Matthew 5.13-16)

© Neil Millar

The words we've just heard follow on immediately from the beatitudes, which mark the beginning of the famous Sermon on the Mount. Jesus has been preaching about what it means to be truly blessed, truly human, truly happy – blessed are those radically available for God (the poor in spirit); blessed are the humble, the merciful, the peacemakers, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, those willing to be unpopular for the sake of truth. Blessed are you when you live this way, for this is the way of God. And now, he goes on to say that those who live this way are essential in some sense to the well-being of the whole. *You are the salt of the earth, the very light of the world*, he tells disciples. Not you should, or could, or will be; *you are!* Salt of the earth! Light of the world!

The first thing to say here is that Christianity is a 'worldly' religion. Notice, the disciples are not exhorted to sit around thinking of heaven, they're told they're 'of the earth', that they have a vital part to play in earth's life. It's true, in Matthew's gospel, Jesus constantly refers to the 'kingdom of heaven', but as this sermon makes clear this Heaven's concern is for the world... That's why Jesus came, because God loves the world (cf. John 3.16). He came among us, became one of us, and having come to *him*, we're exhorted to attend to the earth whose salt and light we are – to attend to earthly relationships and responsibilities, earthly needs and opportunities, earthly challenges and possibilities.

Note too that Jesus doesn't call *himself* salt of the earth, that's what they are (the disciples)! It's a big rap. And note too, it's us plural (the community of disciples) we are the salt of the earth. Now, in an Australian context, where salinity is a huge problem, this metaphor can land a little awkwardly. We may need to contemplate a more contextually appropriate image but in order to do that, we need the sense of what Jesus meant. What is it about salt that made Jesus choose it as a symbol for the community of his followers?

In Jesus' time salt was an indispensable necessity of life. It was (and still is) used as a preservative for all kinds of foods – remember, no refrigeration back then. It was (and still is) a key ingredient for drawing out flavour. Salt was also part of Jewish religious ritual – in the preparation of animal sacrifices. Picking up on this, in the Roman church salt is placed in holy water, and on an infant's tongue at baptism, a symbol of purgation. So, many uses - salt preserves, salt flavours, salt purifies.

And what strikes me about each of these functions is that it doesn't replace or supersede what's there. In each case, salt acts as a catalyst –works *with* what's there in such a way as to enhance or cleanse or preserve. And what also strikes me is that salt is elemental – it *is what it is* and *does what it does*. It's as if Jesus is saying that if you become a receptacle for the kingdom of God, a true follower of his, then you just *will be* salt and you *will have this effect* in the world.

Okay, but what's this about salt losing saltiness ... Can that happen? Well, as Jesus uses the metaphor, that seems to be about losing our connection with the life of God; about being divided rather than pure in heart,

full of yourself rather than poor in spirit; merciless rather than merciful, a provoker of conflict rather than of peace – i.e. it's about losing our 'tang'. If we lose that, what are we good for?

Of course, we all struggle to stay in this place of radical receptivity to God, this place of beatitude. There are all kinds of pressures around us, and within, to hold back, to play safe, to opt out and concentrate on just securing our lives; to become insipid – salt lite! Jesus is clearly aware of this – hence the warning. We need to stay connected with God if we're going to keep our tang in the world, which is surely where prayer, where meditation, comes in – it brings us back to poverty of spirit and purity of heart... renews us in the life of God.

It also helps us discern the wisdom of God, which matters when it comes to 'tanginess'. I'm sure we've all seen people (and perhaps been people) who believed they were doing the right thing (being super 'salty' for Jesus) who were actually just being weird – loud, aggressive, insensitive, painful. When salt ceases to work with its environment, when it takes over or dominates rather than serves as a catalyst, it inevitably causes problems – salination, hypertension, unpalatable food... We need to discern how God wants us to be engaged, how to season and serve the life of the earth – to be 'tangy', responsively faithful – and prayer is key in that. And when we mess up, we need to repent, apologise, learn, and have another go, for as Jesus warns, there's nothing as useless insipid salt! In fact, it's about as useful sticking a light under a bucket, which is where we go next.

You people are the very light of the world, he says, introducing a second metaphor for describing the connection between disciples and their context.

As with salt, light is indispensable for life on earth, and (as with salt) it functions in a variety of ways. It can serve to warn, for example; think of a lighthouse on a dangerous piece of coastline, or flashing lights on a police car, or the security lights around this building. Light is also a source of attraction and welcome; think of the warm glow from a window at night or from a street lamp. Light reveals things, and it guides the way. We are the light of the world, Jesus says, and it's important (as the old spiritual reminds us) to *let our little light shine!* I remember, in my earlier days in the church, there was a group called 'Women Aglow'. I used to think it was a pretty naff name, and yet, there IS something deeply appealing about a human being fully alive and alight! When I came to faith as an older teenager, it was the vitality of the Christian people I met that caught my eye – their warmth and openheartedness, their refusal to play favourites and judge superficially, their humility and willingness to stand and be counted; it really attracted me. I wanted what they had; I wanted to be like that. You are the light of the world, Jesus says; it's a high and holy calling, so (as the song encourages) '*let it shine, let it shine, let it shine!*'

When he spoke about us being salt, Jesus added that warning about losing our tang, and here in his discussion of us as light, he seems to be addressing two kinds of anxiety.

On the one hand, we can *feel* small and inadequate, just a 'little' light – we worry that we're not bright enough. Not a problem, Jesus seems to be saying, '*a city built on a hill cannot be hid*'. He's right, you can see the light from miles away – and we (collectively) are that city!

On the other hand, it may be *this visibility* that makes us nervous. As

Marianne Williamson wrote, it maybe *‘our light, not our darkness that most frightens us.’* But as she insists in the same piece, our *‘playing small does not serve the world’* ... we’re *‘meant to shine’*, she writes, *‘to make manifest the glory of God that is within us’*. *‘As we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.’*

No one lights a lamp and then goes and hides it under a basket, Jesus says. That makes no sense! No, what they do is hang it high on a hook so it can light the whole household. *‘In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.’*

It’s true we’re not to be braggards, show offs, attention seekers... When you pray, Jesus says later in this same sermon, don’t be like the hypocrites who make a big public display of it; *‘go into your room and shut the door and pray in secret’* (Matt 6). But the truth remains, hiding, playing small does not serve the world. If we are being true to Christ, living as followers and learners (which is what disciples are) then, to quote Dietrich Bonhoeffer (118): *‘The cross and the works of the cross, the poverty and renunciation of the blessed of the beatitudes, these are the things which will become visible’*, (118). And these bring glory to God.

So, salt... light... Both images have something important to say about our way of being in the world. They militate against all forms of separation and withdrawal; opting out, hiding, securing our own little bit of paradise and ignoring the rest is not an option as far as Jesus is concerned – it doesn’t *‘cut the mustard’* to throw in another spicy metaphor! And neither does bland conformity or compromise – nothing distinctive, no colour, no substance, no

depth or integrity. Christians are meant to be involved; like salt and light we are to interact with and affect what's there. We work with and for the well-being of the whole ecology of creation – we 'tang' and we 'shine', and God gets the glory. And that's exactly as it must be. Amen.

References

Bonhoeffer, D (1959) *The Cost of Discipleship*, Simon & Schuster, New York, NY.

Bruner, D (2004) *Matthew 1: The Christbook*, WB Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.

Green, M (2000) *The Message of Matthew*, Inter-Varsity Press, Leister.

Williamson, M (1992) *A Return to Love: Reflections on the Principles of 'A Course in Miracles'*.